[Frank and Ella Merryvale]

February 8, 1939

Willard and Cornelia Mitchell (white)

Commerce Street

[Sebring?], Florida

Citrus grove laborer, chiefly a duster and pruner. [Woman?]: Citrus canner.

Barbara Berry Darsey, writer

Veronica [? Huss?], revisor.

FRANK [AND ELLA MERRYVALE?]

“Come in, why do you stand there knockin?!” exclaimed a pleasant voice as I knocked on the first of three doors of the small apartment.

Then, as I hesitated, the door was flung open and a flustered young woman apologized.

“My goodness! Please do excuse me, I thought you were my little boy Jamie, and I wondered why he was a-knockin on the door. Do come in.

This is my kitchen, but we'll go right through to the other room.

This small, stout, pleasant faced woman proved to be Mrs. Merryvale. She was neat and clean, though her clothes were rather worn and faded.

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[As?] we passed through the kitchen where she had been shelling peas, I noticed that the place was sparkling clean. Two chairs stood near a large window where a number of flowering plants grew. On one chair was a large pan of fresh english peas, a basket beside the other chair held the empty hulls.

Mrs. Merryvale was so concerned over the manner of her first greeting that she became quite offusive.

“Take this chair right here by the window, it's cool and comfortable here. I declare I am sorry if you thought me rude. I reckon you were surprised the way I yelled at you to come in.”

I hastened to assure her that it was all right and that she hadn't hurt my feelings. With this she became more at ease.

[As?] I had obviously interrupted the shelling of the peas I suggested 2 that I help her. She accepted my offer and hurried into the kitchen to obtain them, when she returned she placed them on a small table near at hand. Her friendliness had increased with my offer. As we worked she explained by a certain time, therefore she was glad of my help.

“Frank isn't working today for he's on the grove dustin crew tonight. When he works at night he rests most of the day. He just went downtown a few minutes ago, but he'll be back soon for he likes his supper early. He will want to rest a little more before he starts his work.

He doesn't mind the night work as it pays five cents an hour more that day labor. We are mighty glad to get it. We are a-trying to get our farm land fixed up so we can move down there and be real farmers like our daddies are.”

[Ella?] arose and went to a map tacked to the far wall, it was the kind distributed by the oil companies. Here she pointed with pride to a location in the lower end of the county near lake [Istokpega?]

“Right here is our farm and it sure is good land.”

When she had resumed her seat she launched into the relation of her life story.

“I am a real Florida Cracker and all my people are Floridians,” she said. “I was born in Lakeland 26 years ago, but I was just a little girl when my father moved to Avon Park where I was raised on a farm.

“My daddy was born over in Polk County, and my mother, who was a [able?], was born in Lake County near Umatilla. My daddy is Ben Wilkins.

All our family has lived in Florida for a long time. My great-great-grandfather Wilkins is said to have come to Virginia from England, but he soon come to Florida after that, and here we have been ever since. My mother's folks 3 is all of English stock, too, and we have heard that they come from a place call Birmingham.”

She sighed deeply and sifted the bright green peas through her fingers.

“I sure wish we had a record of the families, it would be so interesting. I've always wondered so much about us all, but don't none of us know anything definite. All we know is what others tells us. If we had the money and the ability, I would have family history made up for us, but I hear they cost a lot of money and take a lot of time.

“Frank's people are all Georgians. He was born up near Oakland, but he has been raised here in Florida. His family now lives near Stonewood, Georgia, where his daddy is superintendant of a peach orchard. He also has half interest in a large farm. Frank says

that he's thinking of taking us up there for a while, so he can help his daddy with the work, but I don't want to go. We have plenty to do here, and we have our own farm to work.

“Frank's mother was a Dolly, they use to be real rich and prominent folks up there in Georgia. Several of her uncles had one of the largest stock farms in the state years ago.”

As the peas were shelled by this time, she excused herself for a few minutes and went into the kitchen with them. As my eyes followed her I was again impressed with the spotless order of her home. The kitchen and dining room were combined. An alcove in this long narrow room hold the sink, some shelves, a cabinet, and a three-burner oil stove.

A large square table covered with a white cloth stood near the back door. The bare floors were nicely painted and had recently been polished. There were flowers growing in the large windows, and a bouquet placed on the 4 table lent a cherry aspect to the room.

Mrs. Merryvale returned and continued her conversation.

“I often get little odd jobs like shelling peas, and though they don't pay much I'm always mighty glad to get the work. It sure helps a lot. Not long ago I made a lot of artificial flowers for the Girl Scout Minstrel. At Christmas I helped a florist make a lot of tiny pine wreaths. That's the first work of that kind that I have ever done. But I have always been nimble with my fingers, so it wasn't a bit hard to learn. The florist said I did well right from the start and that's something, because most folks found it mighty difficult at first.”

Rising once more she went into the bedroom. This room was long and narrow like the kitchen and contained two beds, a large bed and a single bed; the latter was placed cross-wise at the foot of the large bed. The floor was painted and there were a number of bright rag rugs scattered about. A small tall table at the end of the room had several books and magazines on it, while a set of shelves on one wall held a large collection of Federal and State agricultural bulletins. Drawing a box from beneath the double bed she exclaimed[!?]

“Just see this here little quilt I finished for a baby!” She carefully unfolded and [shock?] out the small bundle for me to see. “A neighbor put the top together, than ask me to finish it for her. I been a-workin on it for two weeks now. I have to do it off and on, for I don't have much time to spend with these spare jobs.”

The quilt proved to be a dainty piece of work with a top of figured lawn in pastel shades and lined in blue. It was quilted with blue and pink threads. Taking note of my interest, she reached further under the bed and 6 “Mama says is the pease ready? She has to get them to market and can't wait. Here's the 25 cents she promised you. I hoper you got them all ready, cause she's in a hurry.” This rush of words come all in one breath.

Mrs. Merryvale accepted the 25 cents the boy held out to her and in return handed him two large paper sacks containing the peas. She admonished him to be careful and not spill them and closed the door as he left.

She returned laughing and continued:

“Like I said before I get a few odd jobs this way, and I don't never refuse nothing I'm able to do, even if it only pay a dime.

“I use to work in the orange and grapefruit canning factory, but lately there hasn't been much work like that. Beside I would have to go so far away form home and Frank don't like that, he also don't want me to take it up again anyway.

“I quit school in the sixth grade to take up the canning plant work. My daddy's health failed and he lost what money he had so my eldest brother and me started to work.

“The canning plant work isn't so bad once you get use to it, but at first it took all the skin off my fingers. You know, the acid is so bad. Then I got to wearing finger [stalls?] of rubber; somehow I never could get use to rubber gloves like some of the workers use. For some

reason I couldn't never explain I jest felt I had to have my palms bare so that's the reason I just used the [stalls?].

“I made around a dollar a day when I first started, but I worked hard and did my best to learn just right, so it wasn't long before I was making $2 a day. It takes a right fast worker to make more than that, cause I reckon $2.50 is the limit, but I was making that much before I was done.

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“The juicers and pealers get paid by the hour, mostly it's about 25¢ per hour, but I [sectionized?] and that's piece work.”

Once more the kitchen door opened, but quietly this time and a timid little fellow entered and hurried toward his mother. Filled with the importance of his news he forgot his shyness as he advanced.

“Just look here, Mother,” he burst, “but I didn't get to finish it yet!”

He placed a red and white paper valentine in his Mother's lap.

“See! I got all but the legs done. Look at the arms, they is made of little hearts too, just like his face. It's for you, only teacher said we must finish it at home and bring them back for her to see.”

He looked eagerly around the room.

“You get any white paper Mother?” His inquiry was serious. “Teacher gived me the red paper to make the hearts for his legs.”

On being assured that the white paper was available he immediately retired to the kitchen, obtained a cold biscuit and went out on the back steps to eat it.

“That's my Jamie,” said Mrs. Merryvale with pride. “He's just six, but he's going to school. I try to help him all I can for I want him to get a good education. I want to keep him interested too, so that he'll be eager for learning. I realize so often what I missed by not being able to finish school.” She sighed wistfully.

“Well I started to tell you about my work in the canning plant, didn't I? I will try and explain about the sectionizing, it's gonna be hard, but I'll try and make it so you can understand. In sectionizing you have to [cut?] out the pulp of the fruit without gettin any skin, membrane, or seeds in it. It sounds hard to do but it really is easy when you get the knack of it.

“When doing piece work we get paid according to trays. There are four 8 different can sizes. One size is the number 0 can, these is the tiny cans, and come 24 on a tray. This size only holds a whole section, and two half ones on either side. Number 1 cans run 13 on a tray and brings 9¢ per tray. Then there are the number 2 cans with 12 on a tray, and which brings us 12 1/3¢ per tray. The gallon cans run to four on a tray and they bring us [10¢?].

She paused to reminisse, then resumed the detailed account of her life in the canning factory. “We had to be real careful and pack the cans according to a schedule or plan, and we never knew when the [forewoman?] would come around and test our packing. If it wasn't done just right, it was marked against us, and we had to do it all over.

“In all but the number 0 cans, we had to use only whole sections. In every can we had to mighty careful and not let any seeds slip by.

We were allowed one can for broken sections on every tray of perfect packs. These cans were rushed with a broad black stripe. As I just mentioned we was allowed one black stripe can to a tray, but of course the fewer black stripes we had, the better our standing.

In reply to my questions concerning the packing of the sections, she said:

“The sections as I told you before, must be whole and perfect. These are placed in the can with the grain of the plug toward the can side, all must be evenly packed. There is always a little syrup already in the can when the tray comes to us. We don't put no juice in, only the plugs.

“Just let me get my sectionizer knife and show you what I mean.” She hurried out to her kitchen and returned as quickly with an odd looking knife. It had a broad short handle and a thick blade of medium length with sharp edges.

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“When we get work in the canning plant we are charged [75¢] for these knives. When we leave if we want to keep them it's all right, but if we turn them in we get our money back. I wanted to keep mine so I paid the [75¢?].”

Again she paused and sighed [pausively?], then she reached out absently and pinched a withered leaf from one of her window plants.

“They had nighty strict orders in the cannery too. No one was allowed to smoke or use snuff, or any tobacco at all. We was made to wear clean starched uniforms every day. The uniforms was blue with whiteheads band and cost us $1 each. We couldn't return them when we finished work. Usually they was worn pretty bad anyway, from acid spattering on them.

“Sometimes the girls cut the sleeves out for coolness, and just as soon as the foreman caught them, they had to stop and buy a new uniform and put it on, or be discharged. Over the fronts of our uniforms we usually wore rubber aprons with a smaller cloth one over it. This was done because the juice is so bad.

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“We also wore low heel shoes, and socks or stockings. I used white socks, and I had a clean pair everyday. I also had uniforms which I kept neat and clean, although I could usually wear one two days.”

She leaned forward and there was a twinkle in her big blue eyes.

“I never did work in the bull pen,” she half whispered.

I ask her what this was and she smiled.

“Well you see, the sectionizing room is usually divided into three parts. Six large tables are placed down the room, and at the end of each two, large conveyor belts run. This makes an enclosure where some of the women have to stand in order to work at the tables. They work on both sides of the tables, but the part inside with the belts is called the bull pen. In order to get in there, they have to walk up six steps and over the belts, then 10 down six steps again to the floor. Of course there ain't much difference working in there than elsewhere, except it gets warmer in there and in case of an accident or fire, it would be [harder?] to get out. I was always glad cause I got to work on the outside of the belts.”

In regard to working conditions, Mrs. Merryvale continued:

[“We?] went to work at seven in the morning and worked until six; that is if we had a full run of fruit.

“The foremen are strict, but they were kind, so we hardly ever had any trouble. We always had an hour off for lunch, and a comfortable wash room to [rest and ? in].”

“Mother,” yelled Jamie, “can I go down to the corner and watch for daddy. Please mam, can I?”

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“Will you be real careful and not get in the street if I let you go?” His mother asked hesitantly.

“Yes, I'll stay right on the sidewalk. Please can I go?”

“Alright, but don't you stay long if daddy doesn't come. Also, you stay near where mother can call you.”

Jamie departed with a bang of the door.

His mother looked after him with reluctance.

“That child and this upstairs apartment make quite a problem. He doesn't like to stay up here all the time, and I can's always be going down with him. I don't want to make a sissy out of him by making him stay near me all the time, so I let him go out, but I always worry while he's gone.”

With Jamie gone his mother reverted to the discussion of living conditions.

‘The rent here in this little place is only $8 month, and though it's 11 up [steep?] stairs and is pretty hot in summer, we have made the best of it. We're trying to save all we can for our farm. We do have a nice big bathroom here though, and you can't usually get that with cheap rent.’

[As?] she talked she walked restlessly around the room, casting an occasional glance through the open window, to see if she could see Jamie.

I have lost three babies since he came, they all died at birth. Sometimes I'm afraid I ain't agonna have no more. It's been a little over a year since the last one come. When I was a real young girl a [fortune?] teller at a carnival said I would have nine children, and I had

sure hoped it would come true. But I'm afraid it won't. I love children so, and Jamie is such a comfort to me.

Of course children are a responsibility and sometimes lots of trouble, but life is made up of responsibilities and troubles," she added philosophically.

[Heavy?] but firm [step?] was [loud?] [ascending?] the stairs, [intermingled?] wit [childish rattle?]. [?] Frank came in with Jamie clinging to his hand.

[See Mother!?]" the little fellow shouted gleefully, "I found him."

[?] short and [?] blue eyes and fair hair, and was as thin as his wife was stout. His manner was pleasant but diffident. After extending his greeting by shacking hands, he sat down in a chair near a table and listened to our conversation. Jamie climbed up into his lap and the [newness?] of his grimy little overalls and blue shirt made a sharp contrast against the worn and patched ones of his father's.

As our conversation continued he grew more alert and joined in to tell us of his work.

"I am off today," he said, "for I'm gonna work tonight in the dew-dustin.

I am just a common grove laborer, but I been a-workin at it for most five years now.

"It ain't ever laborer that can dust like Frank can!" exclaimed Ella with pride. So they always send for him when it comes to that. It does take some skill and the foreman says Frank is a real specialist in it."

Now, now Ella, I wouldn't say that, but it is a different work from most labor.

I like it better too for it's cooler in the groves at night and [somehow?] the work is [easier?]. Workin on moonlight nights specially, seems like there is kind of a [?] to it," he added softly.

The night work pays 25¢ and hour and the day labor only 20¢. So that's another reason I like dustin better, for that extra five cents sure mounts up. We need it too bein we're tryin to get our farm ready to move to. I guess Ella's done, told you about that, though; she's usually so proud she has to talk." He [put?] a fond glance toward his wife.

We have 40 acres of good farmin land down south of here in this county. We also have some lumber toward buildin our house. I'd like to have a big stock farm like one of my uncles use to have up in Georgia one time, but I can't do that as [we?] start. I aim to raise vegetables and hogs, we already got three fine hogs to get us goin. We sure is aimin to make some money one of these days[!]" he exclaimed.

He paused to roll a cigarette and after lighting it [resumed?].

I 'ave been with this [?] Company and the Sebring [?] from the time I stared citrus work. I reckon they are the best company there is to work for. When they's workin us as day labor, they give us 20¢ an hour for a ten hour day, but only works us nine hours. That means we get 13 one hour for [lunch?] on company time. Most of the companies don't do that, neither, and the men don't like it so well.

We meet at the office every morning and company trucks carries us to the groves. When we get there our work begins at seven and ends at five. We ain't paid for the time we are being carried to the grove, but if we finish one grove and they send us to another, they pay us for the time it takes to transport us.

"The night work is a little different and the hours ain't so regular. When we're pruning it's the same way; we [get?] so interested in it that we won't take a full hour for dinner."

He stopped again for Jamie had fallen asleep. He shifted the child gently and rising, stepped into the adjoining room and deposited the lad on the smaller bed. When he returned he [admonished?] his wife.

[Ellen?] look at that pink geranium! What makes it so [?] up? It looks like you ain't put no water in it lately.

[Ella?] rose [?] and went the her flowers, only to discover that the [?] had slipped from the bottom and let the moisture drain away. She excused herself while she remedied the matter, and [Frank?] and I continued our [discourse?].

“She sure does think a lot of her flowers,” he said, “and I think they're right pretty, too, but I never could mess around with them like she does.

“But gettin back to my work. When it [rains?] the company always [sends?] for us in their big trucks covered with tarpaulins, but of course we're out then as out time stops.

We got a mighty good foreman too, he is [?] and doesn't drive us all the time like some men do. But you know, there ain't no money in 14 workin for the other guy, I found that out a long time ago, so that's the reason I'm so anxious to get out on my own place.

When I first went to work I was just a boy; I ain't but 24 now. I useter make one dollar a day hoeing grass, and I usually worked three days a week. Gee, was I proud! I never was on the relief but once and that was for one day. I made $1.50. Later I did go to CCC camp, but they sent me way out to western Louisiana and I got homesick, so I quit and come back after six weeks. I've been married so long now that the homesickness don't bother me no more. My folks are up in Georgia now. My pa, he's a supervisor of a peach orchard.

The homesick statement brought a note of derision from Ella.

You'd think he was a real old married man, from the way he talks, now wouldn't you?”

She laughed heartily, while Frank answered.

Well, we been married seven years now, and ain't that a long time, especially when I was only 17 to start with. But really," he added earnestly, "I'm mighty glad I married so young because I'd already started to be a mighty bad fellow. Even when I wasn't much bigger than my little fellow, I started to smokin and chewin, and it wasn't long before I was drinkin too. I was also bad at fighting and [caronsin?].

Sometimes I tease Ella about bein a little older than me, but I sure am glad I got her, for it wasn't long after we married that I quit all my bad habits. She didn't never fuss at me, but was just good and kind to me, and when I seen it went agin her I quit.

"I ain't a church member, but she's a Baptist and a good worker too. All I believe is to live the best I know how. Anyway I [wanta?] be real sure I know how to behave before I goin a church. I see so many folks in church 15 who don't seem to be livin right in most ways, and I just ain't got no hankerin to be like them. I expect I'll join in time to come through, and of course I'll go with Ella.

Getting up, he tiptoed toward the bedroom.

"I got somethin I wanta show you."

He returned in a few minutes his arms filled with agricultural bulletins.

"Just look at all these Gover'ment bulletins that Ella gets. They tell her how to raise flowers and how to cook right and what to cook.

She's always sending for them and she reads every one what comes too. She ain't had much education in school, and I haven't neither, but she's always improvin herself by readin. I don't take to readin though, seems like I can't never get my mind to it.

“Ella has even fixed out a budget. It's a thing that lets you live on so much, so you can save the rest. Of course we don't stick to it much, but it seems we can't cause there ain't never enough money to go around. Then things is gettin so costly all the time. But it helps some and Ella has sure tried hard to make it work, for she's like me, she's aimin to get that farm as soon as she can.”

Frank beamed with pride at his wife; she seemed pleased but a trifle embarrassed.

“In my work I average around $15 a week. Sometimes though when the citrus is slack I haul wood and sell it. That don't bring much neither, cause I have to hire a feller, what has a truck, to help me. I have a small car I use in my work sometimes, especially when I'm sent out on a job alone and the company ain't got time to take me, but it ain't no good to me in haulin wood.

“I don't know just how much it would take for us to have a good livin.

Of course our food don't cost us much, then our daddies sends stuff from their farms ever now and then.”

At this Ella went in to the kitchen and returned with a pan of smooth yams which her father had sent her. Then she brought out a palatable looking section of white bacon to show me; this come from one of Frank's uncles in Georgia.

“I have figured out expenses a lot,” Ella said, “and if we consider the improvements we want to make on the farm so that we could live there, it would take around $150 a month for sometime. After that we might be independent.

“I sure hope we can get out on that farm before long, even if we can't build nothin but a little shack. Farm life seems so much better than here in town. Believe me I'd sure never

want to live in no city on the little that Frank makes, and us not havin no more education that we got.

“But I'd sure love to be in the city when they have those big political meetings. Gee it must be a lot of excitement and fun!” [her?] eyes sparkled with the idea.

“Now there you go gettin yourself in politics again,” her husband laughed.

“I don't take much stock in those things,” Frank continued. “But I wouldn't mind goin to a big meetin myself. We have one at Oak Grove near Venus on the 4th of July, and it's always the start of the Democratic campaign. But Ella, she really wants to attend a honest-to-goodness big meetin. I tell her she oughta try and get herself elected to the state and national committees, if she wants to see that sort of thing in a big way.

“We are both Democrats but I don't usually vote. Ella always does, she says it's a great privilege, but it seems like a responsibility to me.

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Anyway, how do we know that the people we help elect will do the right thing by us? Then if they go wrong, all we can do is blame ourselves and it just don't suit me.”

“Now Frank,” Ella scolded, “you know it ain't right to look at it in that way. We all have to vote in order to be good American citizens.

Suppose we lived in one of them there countries where they have dictators, and you were made to vote a certain way. Wouldn't that be awful?

Here in [our?] good, free country things are so different, and we gotta do all we can to keep it that way.

“Of course we all make mistakes in that, just like we make them in other things, but I still think we should try. It ain't always that the folks we vote for, does us wrong. Suppose

everybody hadda felt like that in the last national election. Where would we be now? Well, there ain't no tellin. I think folks did a mighty wise thing when they elected President Roosevelt to office again. And I hope I have the privilege of votin for him to get a third term. Yes, I sure do!" Her eyes gleamed with the [?] of her argument.

Frank laughed heartily and arose.

"Well, it ain't exactly polite to fight before company, so I reckon I better get out. I've got to find Bill anyway and see if he wants to help me go for wood tomorrow."

After bidding me good day, he turned to Ella and kissed her, then he tiptoed in to the little one and ran his fingers through the [?] curly [head?].

When the sound of his footsteps died away as he went down the stairs, Ella resumed her discussion of politics and the country in general.

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"Now, what other country has ever showed so much help for its poor folks? And it's only been since Mr. Roosevelt went in to office. I often wonder what will happen if he doesn't go on with the work, but surely someone else will take it up and go on. It would be all right to stop it if the poor folks could help themselves, but they can't, and they ain't poor through no fault of their's.

"Now you take this here examination that Jamie and me took the other day for tuberculosis, we never could have done it if it hadn't been for the State Board of Health and the Gover'ment, I reckon. We went to the schoolhouse and had the tests made. Jamie showed negative, and that surprised me for a doctor once told me that he had mighty weak lungs. I have always worried about him, and I was sure glad to get the chance to find out for sure.

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“My test showed positive, but the man said that didn't mean an active case. I might have had it years ago and got over it, but the test would show the scar wouldn't it? I wasn't surprised when they told me I had it, for my grandpa, my father's daddy, lived with us when I was a little girl and for ten years before he died he was sick with slow consumption. So I reckon I got it from him.

“I'm [fat?] I know, in fact I'm a lot overweight for my height, but the nurse said that didn't mean anything, because you can have tuberculosis just the same.”

As she talked, she kept glancing in a mirrow trying to reassure herself.

“They come back this week and took X-rays of me, but said it would be two months before I heard from them. If I have consumption, they'll give me free treatment, that is if I ain't able to pay for it myself.”